

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044) 26 9/76

S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

X Release ( ) Excise ( ) Deny

Exemption(s):

Declassify: ( ) In Part (X) In Full

( ) Classify as ( ) Extend as ( ) Downgrade to

SUBJECT: Declassify Discussions with General Villarreal and Staff

## MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

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DATE: December 9, 1976

**PARTICIPANTS:** Brigadier General Jose R. Villarreal, Secretary General of Presidency  
 Mr. Ricardo Yofre, Undersecretary General of Presidency  
 Colonel Miguel A. Mallea Gil, Undersecretary for Institutional Relations of the Presidency  
 Lt. Colonel Cerda, Office of the Presidency  
 Mr. Charles W. Bray, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State  
 Mr. Maxwell Chaplin, Deputy Chief of Mission  
 Mr. Wayne S. Smith, Political Counselor  
 Colonel Paul A. Coughlin, Defense Attaché  
 Mr. Robert S. Steven, Political Officer

**PLACE:** Luncheon at Claridge Hotel, Buenos Aires

**COPIES TO:** AMB, DCM, ARA-Mr. Bray

After initial pleasantries and a lengthy exposition by Villarreal on the experiences of his friend Colonel Pita, who had just escaped from terrorist captivity (reported elsewhere), the conversation turned to the general political situation in Argentina. Smith remarked that I was an interested student of philosophies of government, and invited Villarreal to describe the philosophy of his government.

Villarreal said that the military wanted to help create in Argentina a fundamentally democratic government. The old system and structures had failed--leading to the necessity for military intervention--but the democratic principle remained. The military would not and could not impose a system of government; they intended to develop a truly democratic system with the consultation and participation of all of the representative sectors of the country. It was not yet possible to say exactly what form the new structures would take--indeed he told the politicians when they asked him about this that they were the ones who should come up with solutions. Argentina had a federal form of

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government in theory, he noted as an example, but in fact it was a unitary system run from Buenos Aires. The provinces must be given real powers, to deal with their own particular needs. At this moment the military are working to develop the system "from the bottom up," strengthening the municipalities as the first step in building new structures.

The old system, he said, was a system of government "by and for the party in power, not for all Argentines." There was a "vertical" system, in which party chiefs appointed candidates for office and party members to be local government heads, regardless of the larger needs of the country and without the true consent of even their own party members. Mallea Gil noted that General Serrano in the Chaco Province had appointed local officials without regard to party affiliations, in an effort to emphasize the greater national purpose, above party.

Villarreal offered as an example of ideas which are being considered some thoughts on a reconstituted Congress. The Senate, reduced in size, might represent the Provinces in the traditional fashion, while the House might be made up of "real" representatives of the various interest sectors in the nation. Mallea Gil noted that these were not all new ideas; Yofre had worked on them in 1972 as an advisor to the then Minister of Interior. Yofre hastened to add that the proposed House representation by sectors was not corporatism, but only resembled it in some aspects.

I observed that there were two levels of interest in a democratic system based on political parties. The first was the individual party and sector interest, and the second the larger national interest which bound the nation together. Villarreal responded that this was what had been lost in Argentina; that what was needed was a system which would restore a concept of the national interest. Villarreal said that the military were not interested in staying in power, but only wanted to establish a viable democratic governmental system.

Yofre asked me to explain the attitude of the United States Congress toward Argentina. I offered to try to do so, noting the sensitivity of any member of the Executive in speaking for Congress. I said I had found that misunderstanding in Argentina of the situation in the United States, just as there was misunderstanding of Argentina in my country. The image of the United States was of a great power sailing ahead through calm seas, strong and confident. It should be remembered, however, that we have had some fifteen years of hard and turbulent times. A President had been assassinated, followed by his brother. The policies of another President had been repudiated by the people in 1968. A great black leader was assassinated. A "generation gap" had torn the United States, contributing to the development of terrorism, and Viet Nam had damaged the national consensus. Another President had broken the law, thus creating the greatest constitutional crisis in our country since the Civil War, before he finally resigned.

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The<sup>6-VB</sup> United States had surmounted all this, emerging healthy and confident in 1976, but having experienced the phenomenon of an increasing reassertion of its traditional and fundamental values as a nation. The center of the body politic, or the great majority of the American people, wished to see the same reassertion of traditional values in our foreign policy as well as in domestic government.

Relating these general thoughts to Yofre's question, I said that in this sense Congressmen Drinan, Koch and Fraser were liberal representatives of a powerful current flowing in the U. S. I said that they are not captives of the left, as imagined in Argentina or Uruguay, and that while they might be more liberal than the majority in Congress, they accurately reflect the consensus of the American body politic in their concern over such matters as human rights. There is no anti-Argentine sentiment in Washington, I said, but a general interest in human rights in all countries. I did not know what the climate would be in Congress after January 20, or indeed what would be the attitude of President Carter himself. Secretary of State-designate Vance was a distinguished, moderate man of the center.

I noted, however, that there were two particular points to be considered. First, there were in the United States and in Europe some who opposed the GOA on the grounds that it was a military government, regardless of other factors. These people did not have great influence, despite the disproportionate press notice given to them. On the other hand, and secondly, I said there was not a full appreciation in the United States of the situation inherited by the new government in Argentina in all its political, economic, and terrorist aspects. These factors interacted with genuine concern for human rights to produce a difficult situation.

I offered the example of Congressman Drinan, with the suggestion that it might be instructive. Drinan had come to Argentina with known preconceptions about the situation. Upon his return, and as noted in his address at Georgetown on November 30, he had stated that he found a more complex and tragic situation than he had anticipated. This was a major step for a political figure. But Drinan noted that there are criteria which a government, as distinct from a terrorist movement, must observe in its war on terrorism. He was concerned about human rights themselves, and about repression which had the effect of driving other Argentines to join the subversives. I said that I could not predict the content of the Amnesty International report on Argentina.

Villarreal expressed his gratitude and understanding of my explanation and commented upon the importance of our understanding of the situation in Argentina. He said that it was useful to know some of the background of the problem as it arose in Argentina. In the second Presidency of Peron, in the period 1952 to 1955, there was serious and increasing abuse of the rights of the government's political opponents. This violence created a strong reaction among the people, and contributed to a general Argentine consensus repudiating political process, based upon the general unwillingness to recognize the

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legitimacy of even legal repression of violence. Even the military hesitated to use force against them for fear of having it linked in the public mind with the quite different earlier behavior of the Peron regime, and of being charged with political repression. Even the emergence of the Montoneros was tolerated, and their terrorism not effectively resisted or repudiated. Only in 1975 did the political sectors begin clearly to define themselves against terrorism. Peron himself supported and encouraged the Montoneros from his exile in Spain, but after his new election in 1973 even he had to oppose them. Thus terrorism had been able to establish itself in Argentina, and enjoy political tolerance while doing so.

Villarreal stated that there were "no political prisoners" in Argentina at this time. No one was detained for his ideas or beliefs alone, but for actions; that is, actions linked to subversion.

I noted that there may be further hearings on Argentina in the next session of Congress, and that as a potential witness I was in Argentina to gain perspective. Villarreal emphasized the bad impression which had been made in Argentina by the appearance before the Fraser Committee of Roca and Garzon Maceda, both defenders of terrorism. Referring to the recent GOA action in indicting them for recommending sanctions against Argentina, I asked Villarreal if I could assure the committee that Argentine witnesses invited to testify would not suffer punishment from the Argentine Government. He replied that only the recommendation of sanctions against Argentina by an Argentine was illegal, not testimony or criticism; I could give such an assurance to the committee.

Yofre noted that two Argentine Socialist leaders had recently participated in a Socialist International meeting in Geneva during which they had joined in criticism of the GOA. This was not of concern, he said, and the Socialist leaders "had been welcomed back in Argentina." The only previous use of the law which he could recall was in 1966 against a port workers' union leader who had called for an international boycott of Argentine shipping.

I repeated that I did not know what Congress would do about Argentina and human rights, but that Congressman Drinan would be in the Congress and would be asking the same questions he had discussed with us. These questions would certainly address the right of a government to use the illegal terrorist methods of its enemy, and the resulting effect on the moral legitimacy accorded the government in the eyes of its people. A more specific question might be raised about the failure of the GOA to release a list of its detainees.

Villarreal said that the Army, as the principal responsible force in the struggle against subversion, had the names of all persons detained. But the list could not be released for security reasons. The subversives were organized in cells, and were placed at a great disadvantage, favorable to the security forces, by not knowing who in their network might be under detention.

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Their cell isolation could be turned to GOA advantage in these circumstances. He assured me, however, that every detainee, whether held for the regular courts or under State of Siege authority, enjoyed respect for his human rights. It is difficult to observe the "rules of war," he said, when the other side ignores them, and the terrorist policy now is to die fighting rather than to accept capture.

He added that the Army does provide information concerning detainees in confidential form to judges, when habeas corpus requests are presented, even though that right is suspended under the State of Siege.

I closed with the reminder once again that my visit had been to learn. Villarreal said that he was happy to have had my visit, and suggested that other visitors such as congressmen should come as well to observe the situation. In response to my question, he assured me that such congressional visitors would be welcome and safe in Argentina, and that, for example, President Videla had assured Ambassador Hill that Congressman Koch would be welcome.

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